

TESTIMONY OF THE GREATER WASHINGTON BOARD OF TRADE *Oversight Hearing on Handgun Laws in the District of Columbia*

*For Presentation to the House Committee on Government Reform
June 28, 2005*

Good afternoon. My name is Bob Peck, and I serve as President of the Greater Washington Board of Trade. The Board of Trade consists of about 1,200 members that, together, comprise about 40 percent of this region's private sector workforce. As the voice of business in the National Capital Region, we have been deeply troubled by efforts over the past year to repeal the gun safety laws that are in place to protect the families, workers and tourists of the District of Columbia.

Today, Washington, DC is in the midst of an economic renaissance that has earned the acclaim of urban visionaries and captured the interest of business investors throughout the world. Downtown blocks once lined with vacant or abandoned buildings now comprise the second strongest office market in the nation, behind only Midtown Manhattan. Streets that were once deserted after nightfall are now lit by four-star hotels, *Zagat*-acclaimed restaurants and international retailers. From January of 2002 to December of this year, five thousand new residential units will have opened in Downtown Washington, an area that was once dismissed as an urban office park. As a District employer who vividly recalls more difficult times, the Board of Trade takes considerable pride in our city's transformation.

To sustain this climate of economic revival, our city's elected officials and business leaders have worked hard to overcome the perception that Washington, DC is not a safe place to bring the family. It was not that long ago that the District gained some notoriety for what were unacceptable crime statistics. In some parts of the country, it may have seemed like an ironic punchline. For those of us who were here during that difficult period of time, it was the city's economic and civic nadir.

It is in that spirit of pride and long-term perspective that the Board of Trade has consistently supported the handgun safety laws that are currently on the books, and opposed legislative efforts to roll back these safeguards. Last year, we joined our District business colleagues in unified opposition to the *District of Columbia Personal Protection Act*, and have expressed our firm opposition to the version introduced earlier this year. The Board of Trade believes this proposal would do considerable harm to the city's hard-earned reputation as a great place to do business.

If passed by Congress into law, this bill would eliminate the ban on handguns and handgun ammunition in the District of Columbia, eliminate the ban on semiautomatic weapons and even eliminate the registration requirement for firearms. Passage of the *District of Columbia Personal Protection Act* would garner national attention, thus refueling the harmful perception that the District is a haven for weapons that have no place in our society, and that people should come here at their own risk.

My testimony should not be interpreted by this committee as a blanket endorsement of the status quo. We still have room for improvement on the crime front. However, a review of our city's recent crime statistics provides clear and compelling evidence that things are moving in the right direction. According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, murders, rapes and robberies each declined by more than 20 percent from 2003 to 2004, while aggravated assaults fell by nearly 14 percent. The 198 murders that occurred last year in the District are still far too many. However, when comparing that total with 399 in 1994, or 482 back in 1991, one cannot help but acknowledge that this city – under this police department and under these current laws – is a far safer place today to live, work and visit.

We will continue to support responsible and collaborative efforts to improve the safety of District communities, and we will continue to fight the imposition of policies that could take our city back to a time most of us would rather forget. Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for your consideration.

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